

Gardening As Exercise?

Want to save money at the gym and grocery store? Why not combine America's #1 pastime with a fitness program that is enjoyable, inexpensive and rewards the participant with fresh produce and flowers. Our grandparents didn't go to the gym, they burned calories the old fashioned way – gardening.

Doing something is always better than doing nothing. With gardening, everyone can participate. Start slowly and consider individual health issues. Warm up and stretch legs, hips, shoulders and neck for five to ten minutes before beginning each session. Work at a constant pace, taking frequent breaks so as not to overwork muscles. Always drink plenty of water; wear protective clothing and sunscreen. Gardening energetically can burn anywhere from 120 to 200 calories per half-hour! Improving muscle tone and strength are added incentives to get off the couch and into the yard.

General Safety

For the good of your back and knees, follow these tips for comfort and safety:

- If you spend time on your knees, use a cushion. Keep back straight and don't sit on your heels. Stand up and stretch every 10 to 15 minutes.
- Use a lightweight, long-handled shovel or spade with good grips. Kneel or sit while using hand tools. Ergonomically designed equipment makes gardening more enjoyable. Ames, Fiskars and Achievable Concepts are several suppliers of such equipment.
- Bend at the knees and hips when picking up tools or heavy objects. Place feet flat on the ground while squatting and don't lock knees when bending.
- Bend at the knee and step forward as you raise and dump each shovel. NEVER bend from the back as you rake or hoe and alternate stance between right-handed and left-handed, as often as possible.
- Consider a raised bed, barrels, or planters at waist height if you suffer from back pain.
- If you strain yourself, apply a cold pack at 10 minute intervals during the first 48 hours or a heat pack at 10 minute intervals after 48 hours.
- Avoid all-day marathon gardening sessions.

Maximizing Fitness Potential

As with any exercise program, start slowly. The basic program has the following components: stretch, warm up, power building and cooling down.

For the good of your back and knees, follow these tips for comfort and safety:

Stretch – Stand straight with legs slightly bent. Hold a rake or broom horizontally over head and slowly bend to right and then to the left. Breathe and repeat sequence several times. Holding broom over head, twist torso side to side a dozen times. Roll head around shoulders to left and then right, twirl arms in a windmill fashion.

Lunge and Weed – Combine stretching with light gardening exercise. Standing before garden bed, step forward with left leg, bending the knee at a right angle. Keep right leg straight behind with the knee almost touching the ground. Using a hand tool, weed for 10 seconds. Stand up and continue alternating legs until you feel well stretched.

Warm up – After stretching start with light aerobic exercise: weeding, cultivating, mulching and inspecting. Walk briskly while spraying. Weed alternating between the following positions:

- Standing straight using legs
- Lunge and Weed
- One foot flat on ground, one knee bent
- Squatting with both legs
- Kneeling
- Sitting and weeding

Mulch using a wheelbarrow or cart. Lower your body with your legs and spread mulch around plants.

Power Building Exercise – Increase exercise rate, raise heart rate 50 to 80 percent of maximum heart rate. Use a posthole digger for small holes. Digging, double digging and turning compost will build strength and endurance.

Stretch and Cool down – Enjoy a cool drink and the fruits and flowers of your labor.

More information on designing a program for your fitness level can be found in Jeffrey Restuccia's book *Fitness the Dynamic Gardening Way*. He has suggestions for fit individuals who want to incorporate gardening with traditional aerobic and cross-training exercise programs. Plans for building circuit-training structures for pull-ups, dips and sit-ups that double as garden structures are also included.

Internet sites listed below also have activities to keep the gardener active in the winter for individuals with special needs. Adopt the activities that you like and don't be afraid to invent new moves. Always keep the general safety tips in mind. Above all, exercise in the garden should be fun!

References

Restuccia, Jeffrey P. [Fitness the Dynamic Gardening Way](#). Cordova, TN: Balance of Nature Publishing, 1992.

Sturm, Ellen. Let's Get Physical. *Country Living Gardener*, May/June 2003: 24.

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